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ABSTRACT

This guide focuses on the crucial role parents have regarding children and service. Section 1, developing a strategy for parent involvement, discusses parent support for service learning at school and parents' reinforcement of family participation in community service. Section 2, keeping parents informed, addresses three topics: information to provide to parents about the value of service learning for students; checklist of ideas to use when developing a parent education plan; and methods to integrate service learning into the framework of communication with parents. Section 3, involvement with school service learning, describes these parent roles: become parent liaisons, organize a phone tree, brainstorm with teachers, group work with teachers and students, contact community organizations, chaperone or drive on field trips, collect supplies, document activities, assist in the classroom, assist in service, attend student exhibitions, help with writing grants, attend conferences as school representatives, coordinate family service opportunities, and network with other schools. Section 4, families serving together provides a framework to present ideas on family service to parents and can be formatted as a handout that covers getting started, encouraging children to help regularly, family action, and reflection. Other topics discussed are service learning and literacy, short- and long-term participation, and establishing resources for families. (YLB)

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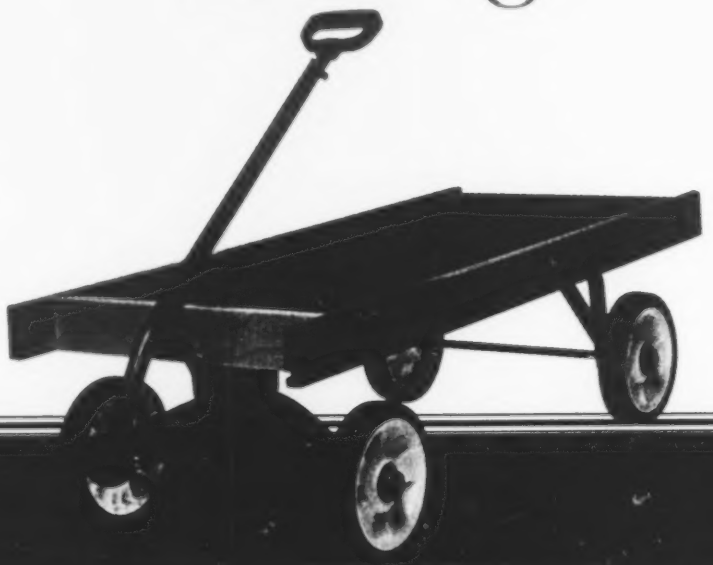
LINKING LEARNING WITH LIFE

Parent Involvement In Service Learning



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Parent Involvement In Service Learning

by Cathryn Berger Kaye

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Introduction

"What is community service?" I asked my two daughters several years ago when they were quite young. They responded with blank expressions.

"Ariel," I said, addressing my eldest, age five at the time. "Do you remember when we painted out graffiti together?"

"Oh, community service!" she exclaimed. "That's when you do things as a team!"

I felt relief and posed the next question.

"Can young children do community service?"

"Sure, of course, yes," they answered in unison.

"What can they do?"

"It's not hitting," replied Ariel.

"It's not biting," came from three-year-old Devora.

"And not pushing," from Ariel.

Then, Devora lit up saying, "And you don't jump on the furniture!"

Besides commenting on child development, they were definitely on to something. Actually, they were quite correct. We want our children to have kind, appropriate behaviors. Plus, we want them to know how to care for their environment, whether it's a couch in our living room or the wildlife in their natural habitats.

From acts of kindness, we can move deliberately so our children learn about their world and develop helpful attitudes to people in need. We want them to be able to see these needs and take thoughtful, appropriate actions. This develops and enriches their character, allowing our children to be reflective, considerate participants in civic life, essential to the continuation of our democracy.

The dialogue with my daughters became a launching pad to consider the crucial role parents have regarding children and service. We are in the unique position to help at home and at school. There are ample opportunities in both settings to influence the experience and knowledge of young people. As an educator, I have observed countless parents assisting through the schools in myriad ways, all the while

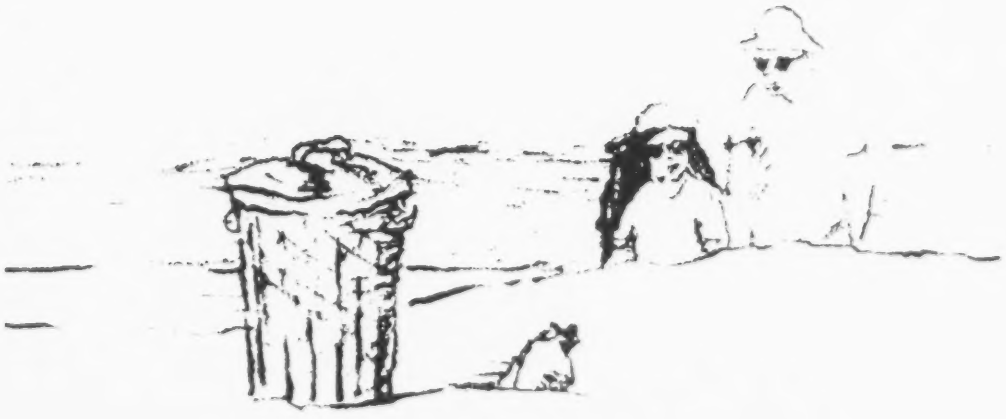
communicating an important message to children and adolescents: I support you as you strive to be productive citizens, providing meaningful, valued assistance to our community. At home, we are catalysts to become involved directly, as a family.

Being part of my children's service experiences adds a dimension to our relationship. While helping with a statewide beach clean-up or preparing food in a local kitchen serving people living with AIDS, we learn about each other. We share common moments that afford us time to talk about things that matter. We develop mutual respect. We experience the reciprocity inherent in service as we all benefit. And together we strengthen the lifelong habit of making a difference.

Cathryn Berger Kaye

Special thanks to Ariel, now age 13, and Devora, age 11, who continue to share many treasured moments with both their parents.

Author's note:
Please be aware that when using the term "parents," I refer to all adults who take on the role of parenting children.



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Developing a Strategy for Parent Involvement

Schools want parents to be involved in the education of their children. In fact, we need our parents as partners in education. The unification of parents and schools creates the best educational atmosphere for all children. Parents bring valuable resources, information, and ideas. Their participation is of paramount importance, since by the very act of involvement, parents communicate to their children that education and schools are important, a critical message for young people.

Studies show that children get "better grades, have a better attitude toward school and higher aspirations if parents are aware of what's happening in school and encourage their children (Lynn, 1994)." Students learn more, have greater achievement, and are less likely to repeat a grade, be suspended, or expelled if parents are involved and discuss school programs and activities (Seline, 1997; Holland, 1997).

Parental involvement can take place: 1) at school with curriculum, special programming, support organizations, and governance; and 2) at home. Each of these arenas has unique connections with service learning.

As you read about the opportunities for parent involvement, consider the similarity to what we want students to experience in quality service learning.

- Make sure parents are prepared through ongoing opportunities to find out what service learning is, how this benefits children, and what they need to know so they can be helpful.
- Provide a range of ways parents can take action in support of service learning.
- Invite reflection, feedback, and insights about the program.
- Offer ways for parents to demonstrate what they have experienced while becoming resources and leaders; this demonstration of skills and knowledge can result in parents ultimately assisting in all facets of recruitment, preparation, action, and reflection of their parent peer group.

Parent Support for Service Learning at School

We want parents to be willing, motivated partners in their support for service learning being integrated into education. This requires:

- the school community welcoming parents as partners
- information about what service learning is and is not, and agreement regarding service learning as a valuable teaching strategy
- opportunities to observe and participate in service learning
- clearly delineated roles that acknowledge their personal needs
- opportunities for parents to develop skills they need to be helpful
- consistent and reliable information about what is occurring
- ways for parents to ask for assistance from administrators, faculty, other parents, and community members

There is an initial hurdle to overcome—breaking down the isolation of parents from schools. Too often parent involvement, particularly in middle and high school, is associated with a child in trouble. Also, adolescents want more independence from and less identification with their family. Seeing a parent at school is not high on many a child's preference list. In fact, older children often discourage their parents from getting involved.

Parents who are active during elementary school years may pull back when their child matriculates to middle school due to work or other obligations thinking this is preferable not only to their child, but to the institutions. The tendency then is to have greater involvement in elementary school, less in middle school, and when students reach high school, most parents cannot be found. We have to change this thinking, reeducate parents about the potential of these partnerships, and reduce the "parent dropout" rate.

The challenge for administrators, teachers, and parent leaders is recruitment of a large, diverse parent population and finding the proper match for parent participation with the service learning approach to sustain this involvement.

Family Participation in Community Service

We want parents to reinforce the idea of service within their family structure. This reinforcement expands the notion of service being a valued and necessary action to keep our democracy thriving.

Family participation in service differs from school-based service learning. Parents do not have a formal curriculum or need to consider the skills and content being studied. Families look for shared experiences that bring family members together and provide meaningful service. They want to widen the breadth of their child's experience in the community. They may seek opportunities that move beyond "entertainment" to "actions with a purpose." Many parents appreciate knowing about family-oriented service projects.

Families usually fit into one of these three categories:

1) Actively engage in service with family members, often through a particular service or religious organization
2) Occasionally participate in service projects, usually during the winter holidays
3) Rarely, if ever, participate in family service

Identify the parents most involved in family service. These more experienced parents can assist as resources and guides for other less experienced or reluctant parents. They can be pivotal in moving the second group of occasional participants to consider involvement during other times of the year. They know of opportunities and may exude a contagious enthusiasm. Likewise, occasional parents can influence those with little or no engagement to get started during the holidays.

While some parents will appreciate the school's encouragement of family service, others may question the school's role in this. Consider how for many years schools were the hub of a community, where people gathered and exchanged information. Increasingly, even in urban areas, schools are being recast in this image, resuming the identification as a gathering place. Family service can initiate and help

to build a sense of community that extends beyond the school walls.

Parents may also express fear or discomfort when introduced to doing family service. Reservations may be more pronounced when working with populations that are homeless, or with people who are living with AIDS. Parents may wonder: "Will we be safe?" "What can we expect to happen?" "I've never done this before; what if my child asks a question that I can't answer?" While some service opportunities are predictable, some situations are less so. Service can place us in the middle of unknown territory where the family can learn together. Accurate information and guidance from professionals who work in the nonprofit sector is most helpful and reassuring to parents. Meaningful service opportunities are available that help people learn about each other in respectful ways.

Facing challenges as a family is actually quite compelling, as is meeting real community needs. Together, every family member can learn vital lessons.

When there is hesitancy in your parent body, find the voice that parents will listen too—a most respected teacher or school administrator, or another parent. Continue to inform families about ways to perform service as you advocate for participation. While schools will always have the prime responsibility of educating children, our children belong in families. Family education and participation in service have benefits for the entire community.

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Keeping Parents Informed

Parents should be informed about service learning programs and projects from inception on. If you have launched a program, consider the earliest opportunity to initiate your ongoing information systems. Keep in mind that these systems will grow and change, like every dynamic program, based on feedback you receive from faculty, parents, and students, as well as new ideas that are generated.

As your foundation, be sure that all administration, faculty, and office staff understand service learning. These critical players make sure your parents have appropriate, necessary, and accurate information, and connect them to what needs to be done. The same applies to the established parent leadership at the school—the Parent Teacher Association (PTA, PTO, PTSA), school-based management groups, Booster Clubs, and so on. Find out who among each of these groups has a natural affinity to service. Draw them in to a core think tank as you strategize and attract new parents into the process.

Essential to success is providing accurate and ongoing information, along with your invitation to participate. What do parents need to be informed about?

The Value of Service Learning for Students

Parents want assurance that service learning benefits children and helps them to learn. Consider these key questions, and provide the following information to your parent body.

What is service learning? Service learning:

- is a teaching method that connects what students learn with valued service that benefits the community
- enables children to use and acquire skills and knowledge
- helps children to understand their world
- is different from community service by the integration of service within classroom learning
- strengthens civic awareness and participation

The implementation of service learning as a teaching strategy consists of Preparation, Action, Reflection, Demonstration, and Recognition/Celebration.

Preparation occurs as students read, conduct interviews, research with various source materials, ask questions, develop new skills, acquire new information, increase civic awareness, and apply what they already know to content areas of study.

Action occurs as students provide either direct or indirect service or take civic action. Service often looks like making something for someone, improving a situation, teaching, or sharing information.

Student reflection occurs in anticipation of what will occur in service, as they are involved with the experience of service, and while considering what took place, recognizing the learning that has occurred, asking questions and coming up with ideas for what might happen next.

During demonstration, students show mastery of skills, insights, and outcomes by, for example, reporting to community members, writing letters to local newspapers regarding issues of public concern, or extending their experience to develop future projects benefiting the community.

Recognition/celebration allows for students to be acknowledged by their school and community for contributions and accomplishments. Recognition/celebration can be a culminating activity as all participants come together.

How does service learning benefit my child and other students?

Service learning:

- increases student motivation and their desire to know
- improves retention—learning is like fish: If you don't use it, it won't keep!
- helps students connect the different subjects they study with the "real world"
- cultivates self-awareness, initiative, and responsibility
- develops teamwork in a noncompetitive environment
- replaces stereotypes with respect as students interact with diverse populations
- prepares students for work by interacting with professionals in different settings and seeing the consequences of their actions
- allows students to develop civic participation through engagement with important issues in today's society
- teaches the process of reflection through example and experience
- promotes a lifelong commitment to public service and learning

Does service learning take away from the standard curriculum?

Service learning enhances standard curriculum. Students learn to use traditional skills and content in meaningful ways and find additional knowledge and learning sources available only when preparing and being engaged in service. At all grade levels and with most subject areas, teachers can identify ways that service is a natural and meaningful extension of the curriculum.

How does service learning fit into this technological age?

Service learning is essential to young people growing up in this age of computer stations and cyberspace. As noted by Jeremy Rifkin, "service learning may be an antidote to the increasingly isolated world of simulation and virtual reality children experience in the classroom and at home in front of the television and at their computer workstations (Slavin, 1996)."

Many parents are concerned that as children become enmeshed in the simulated and virtual worlds of television and computers, they become more detached from reality. In fact, books and articles describe children lacking a core identity and firm understanding of the "real world" gained through life experiences. Service learning provides for children's psychological and social development, as well as their civic development (Slavin, 1996).

Parents may have additional questions regarding safety, time spent outside the classroom, and appropriateness of certain service-related experiences. Be sure to record these and respond appropriately, though not always immediately. Some questions may require research, finding articles, collecting examples of classroom success stories, parent participation to see first-hand, or simply allowing time for the program to evolve and develop. Invite knowledgeable parents to respond to questions during presentations and to write articles in school newspapers. This will keep the conversation about service learning on the front page.

Ways to Educate Parents

Include service learning as part of your parent education plan. Vary the kind of information you present to reach and appeal to the broadest audience possible. Review this checklist of ideas when developing your plan.

- School Governance. Be sure the entire school governance group understands service learning and the importance of implementation by the school community. Some schools have established a service learning subcommittee of administrators, faculty, and parents to support the development and implementation stages.
- Back-to-School Night. Often this event attracts the largest parent group and is an ideal time to place service learning on the agenda. An introduction to service learning can include students, teachers, and/or parents, and a description of past accomplishments and future plans. Use this forum every year to build an understanding of service learning.
- Newsletters. Solicit articles from various perspectives, parents, students, faculty, and community members to inform about service learning in action. If you don't have a school newsletter, then students can start one as a service learning project, with parental involvement.
- Displays. Students may set up service learning displays that parents can view at school and community events. For example, tables can be set up at the entrance to sports events with posters where information about community needs, organizations, or upcoming events can be handed out. Parents can help!

- A Service Learning Event. Schedule a parent education program on the value of service learning. To find a speaker, contact your state's Learn and Serve Coordinator. Within a school community, a presentation can include the principal and faculty describing the rationale for service, the plans and needs for support, and students explaining their participation and the learning that has occurred.
- Participation. Design ways for parents to experience service alongside their children or other students. First-hand knowledge of the excitement, learning opportunities, and impact communicates the value of service learning directly.
- Family Service. At every occasion, including those mentioned above, highlight ways families can perform service together. Provide lists of agencies and events appropriate for whatever age students attend your school.

My Child's Classroom

In particular, parents want to know how service learning fits into their own child's classroom and schedule. Teachers, with assistance from administration, can explain what is occurring in their classes and within the overall curriculum of the school.

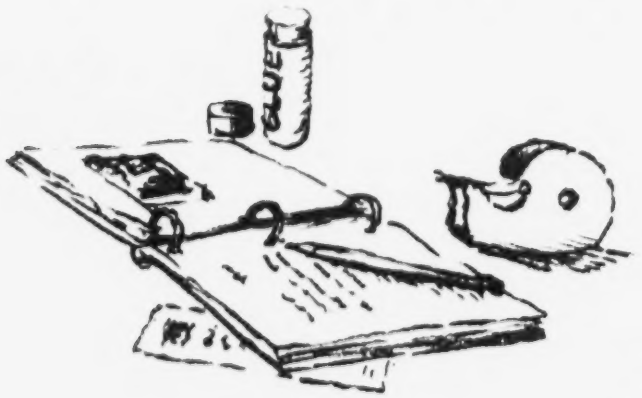
This begins with teachers being adept at the concept and practice of service learning. Administration can provide written resource materials to support the educational philosophy behind service learning. At faculty meetings, teachers can discuss strategies and ways to best reach the parent body. Teachers will then need to integrate service learning into their framework of communication with parents. A variety of methods is recommended.

- Parent Visitations. Even if service learning is part of a plenary back-to-school night overview, explain the specifics in the classroom. If groups of teachers collaborate across disciplines, as occurs in many middle and high schools, coordinate how the big picture of service can best be explained. Imagine if in every classroom visited, parents received a literal "piece of a puzzle" that formed a picture of service learning.

- Visual Support. Designate bulletin boards and other wall space for articles, photos, student poetry, and artwork related to service learning. Parents will become accustomed to and even expect to see information about service learning.

- Teacher/Parent Conferences. Include feedback about children's participation in service. If children assemble a portfolio, suggest they include preparation work and reflective writings that help parents understand the learning opportunities and insights.
- Classroom Updates. When teachers send home information about classroom studies, include service learning plans and progress. Consider adding questions and resource needs so parents can become involved.

As you communicate about service learning, keep in mind that parents are usually not educators by profession and often need repeated examples and explanations to help them fully grasp the concept and implications. Also, avoid education jargon whenever possible!



Involvement With School Service Learning

What's the best way for parents to learn about and support service learning? Personal involvement. The process of identifying purposeful roles for parents to be supportive evolves over time. Often their participation depends on the specific service learning plans. There are overarching ideas to consider, adapt, and use as a springboard when considering a role for every parent.

A Role for Every Parent

There are myriad ways parents can assist teachers with service learning. Parents help advance the implementation of service learning all across the country, and many of these parents work full-time. Equipped with an understanding of the rationale for service learning, many parents extend themselves to assure their children have the opportunities that only service learning can bring.

Begin with identifying your parent resources. Find out what parents have to offer as far as skills, talents, knowledge, experience, and time. This can be done through phone interviews conducted by a network of parent volunteers or written questionnaires distributed at back-to-school night or through the mail. Older students (grades 5-12) can be involved in developing a "Parents as Resources" survey, conduct interviews with their parents and other key members of their family, and develop a permanent computer database of gathered information. This process allows students to develop their vocabulary and interviewing skills. Students can ask when parents are available to help, learn about their community connections, find out who is able to pick up library books or needed supplies, go on field trips, or help within the classroom.

Questions for parents can be general or relate to a specific service activity:

- What are your hobbies?
- What are several skills that you use in your home and at work that you would enjoy sharing with students?
- Describe one of your talents.
- Have you been involved with youth programs and education?
- What are your concerns about our community?
- What are organizations that help in our community?
- Describe a time that you were involved with service to the community—for example, helping a neighbor, or working with an organization.
- In what ways do you help in our community?

How Can Parents Help?

Use this list to begin generating ideas. Adapt as needed to fit your particular school environment and grade level, and whether you are an urban, suburban or rural community. As you review the list, note that some of these tasks can be done by older students, sometimes with parent partners, as your service learning program develops.

- Become parent liaisons. Teachers can ask for service learning room parents to help coordinate parent activities and assistance. This can be done by a team of parents, ideally with some available during the day and others in the evening. Tasks can be divided according to convenience. Once identified, these parents can help coordinate all of the tasks and roles listed below.

- Organize a phone tree. Use your parent resource lists when designing a phone tree so parents can be alerted about classroom needs in a quick and organized manner.

- Brainstorm with teachers. Parents can meet with teachers to generate ideas about community needs, resource people in the community, and ways to get materials and supplies.
- Group work with students. Parents can moderate or facilitate student discussion groups to review project ideas or plans, to practice skills such as interview techniques and presentations, or to assist with a classroom simulation that prepares them for action. This can be done during school time or as homework.
- Contact community organizations. Parents can make calls or visits to identify organizations as resources and to learn ways that students can provide assistance to these agencies. Information can be catalogued into a community resource directory. Parents who have experience with local agencies may have valuable contacts.
- Chaperone or drive on field trips. When students visit sites within the community, parents who are available during school hours can come along. Be certain to brief parents about their role as observers or participants, depending on the specific situation.
- Collect supplies. Parents can assist with errands to pick up supplies, donated merchandise, or library books for research.
- Prepare supplies. Materials may need to be made—for example, squares of paper cut for a first grade art project to be done with their elderly friends. This can be done in someone's home in the evening.
- Document activities. Parents can help record in words, photographs, and video the learning and service experience. For example, a parent can be present when a community member visits a class to describe helping at a soup kitchen. Parents can summarize the presentation, give examples of students' questions and the responses, and include a synopsis of what students learned as

described in the reflection session. Parents may collaborate with students to be sure activities are written up, photographs are taken, and a scrapbook or display assembled. Rarely are classroom learning opportunities adequately documented since teachers have so many responsibilities. Effective documentation by parents and students as is appropriate, can help teachers learn from each other both in your school as well as your district, state, and nation. This is also valuable when applying for service learning grants and keeping other parents knowledgeable and supportive of your school commitment to service learning.

- Assist in the classroom. Parent volunteers can help in class when varied tasks need to be accomplished simultaneously—for example, writing letters, preparing a performance, making flyers, preparing displays.

- Assist in service. Parents can be part of the actual service performed to help others. Always be certain the students are the primary service providers and adults are present for back-up, support, and for tasks inappropriate for children to perform.

- Attend student exhibitions. Many schools involve parents and community members when students give evidence of their learning through presentations, displays, assemblies, or whatever format fits the experience. With service learning, students benefit from having a public forum to explain what they have learned and the methods they used along the way. This may fit with your plans for authentic assessment. Invite parents to attend and give feedback to students.

- Help with writing grants. Parents have become effective grant writers to get financial donations or in-kind materials. Some schools have offered evening grant writing workshops for parents to learn the appropriate skills, with successful outcomes in obtaining awards.
- Attend conferences as school representatives. Invite parents to join the school team in attending local, state, and national service learning conferences. If your school is presenting a workshop, include parents.
- Coordinate family service opportunities. Keep an eye out for the parents who naturally attract families to join in service to others. Suggest they form a committee to identify opportunities and publicize them in different classrooms or through schoolwide notices and publications. If the school has a voice mail system or web site, include family service opportunities as a listing or place to call for updates.
- Network with other schools. Parents can collaborate with their counterparts from other schools. This exchange can be by school levels, for example, by creating an elementary school service learning association, or by bringing together schools that feed into each other so kindergarten through twelfth grade parents can meet. While learning from each other, parents can use this consortium to host special events, such as seminars on service learning for school administrators and teachers. They can broaden their network to include school personnel, community members, and young people. They may establish a forum for an ongoing exchange of ideas, problem solving, community resources, and growing collaborations that keep service learning vital.

Parents as Collaborators

What is most exciting and gratifying is how parents eventually come forward who care deeply about community involvement for all students. They take service learning to heart and comprehend the deep implications and value for students. These parents often become collaborators who take the lead for other parents in communicating the benefits and keeping the stream of parent participation flowing.

These parents may also be helpful on the curriculum side of service learning. They have been known to be effective in listening to the curricular needs of students and helpful in generating service ideas that have appropriate curriculum connections.

And Questions Arise

- What if parents do not come forward to help with our service learning program?

  This can happen, especially in schools where parent participation is minimal, and the same group of parents seems to take on all the essential roles. The administration and faculty must be persistent in outreach, especially with parents of new students entering the school. Include the expectation of participation in all written materials and at orientation meetings. Start with a small group and build a few parents at a time.

- What if students tell parents, "I don't want you to help at school"?

  Encourage parents to help in classrooms different from the ones with their children. This can create a respectful distance for the students, while building a sense of schoolwide support for service learning by parents. Use your core group of parents as role models for others. Some parents actually prefer to help other classes.

- What if our parents help run a cocurricular community service program?

  Some schools have a history of community service programs that parents help to coordinate. Sometimes, there is a smooth transition to adding service learning to the school, and parents help in the classroom and keep the cocurricular projects going as well.

  In some cases, the school modifies or suspends the cocurricular efforts in favor of classroom-oriented service learning. Parents may become upset by this move and feel disenfranchised or unappreciated for their efforts. In these situations, it is of paramount importance to keep these active parents informed of any changes and invited into the service learning discussion as soon as possible. Keep in mind that teachers new to service learning do often need time to integrate this method into their classrooms and may be reluctant to immediately involve parents. Keep looking for ways to integrate parents that are helpful to teachers and students.

- How will we know if the parent component of service learning is working?

  As with all aspects of service learning, this is where reflection comes in. Give parents a chance to share their experiences and insights. Have them talk among themselves, with teachers, and with students as well. Through discussion, parents can learn how they are helpful and how their role is indispensable to the success of service learning.

  While the primary focus of service learning is to benefit students, the beauty of service learning is how it touches all those involved—the faculty, community members, school administrators—and parents are definitely among this group. Urge parents to share their ideas, and improve their own roles.

- Is it appropriate to thank the parents?

  Certainly! This is another learning opportunity as students show their appreciation to the adults who help them in the service learning process. Discuss ideas and options with the students. A certificate, a thank you, appreciation banner, a letter—whatever is chosen adds a personal touch from the students to every parent who has been involved.

Families Serving Together

Service Habits in the Home

"Service is the rent each of us pays for living."
Marion Wright Edelman

Children learn best by observing how we live our lives. As the ethos of service becomes more visible in daily family life, children naturally become more active in helping in their community, and become more adept at service learning in school.

The following ideas will help parents to get started and move towards service experiences. The topic of family service can be discussed during parent education and information distributed as a handout for parents to take home.

Be sure to differentiate between school-based service learning and family service. These are not the same. The parent is not in the role of a teacher who is constantly aware of the skills, content, and knowledge base of curriculum, helping students with tasks and assignments needed to be done within the service learning context. While both parents and teachers may be on the lookout for those critical and valuable teachable moments that come to light through service, the family environment is different. Parents can listen and learn about their child's thoughts, feelings, and ideas by doing service together and share an adult perspective of the world. Family service, most importantly, brings parent and child together.

The ages of the children always need to be considered when discussing issues of community concern and determining family service projects.

The following can be a framework to present ideas on family service to parents and can easily be formatted into a handout.

Getting Started—Discussing Service Related Issues

- Become personally involved in service, and share what you do with your children.
- Talk frequently about community needs and concerns; have discussions at meals, on the way to school, or while taking a walk.
- Pay attention to social concerns that captivate your child. Use their questions as a clue for interest. Resist quick answers, and instead discuss ways to find out more together.
- Look for articles about community issues, volunteerism, and people making a difference in newspapers and magazines. Slip an article, photo, or comic strip under a dinner plate.
- Offer a problem that needs solving, and ask for their ideas or help; for example, "I have some clothes to donate to someone in need—where can I give them?" Problem solve together.
- Select television shows that highlight children involved as problem solvers and service providers in their communities.
- Read books aloud that relate to service themes. Books can stimulate discussion and help family members talk about their own experiences, concerns, and questions.
- Notice the observations children make when driving through their community regarding the environment and how people are living.
- Share your work and professional role in contributing to the community.
- Tell stories from your life and the lives of family and friends that relate to helping others and being helped by others.
- Attend community cultural and recreational events; find out about the issues that bring people together—often there is a service connection.
- Learn about, discuss, and participate in the service children do through school.

Encourage Children to Help Regularly

- For younger children, begin with simple caring acts—watering plants, feeding a pet, recycling paper.
- Find ways to help people you know—visit an elderly neighbor, make soup for an ailing friend, take care of infants to give parents free time.
- When taking part in charitable collections, for example canned food drives, talk about the receiving agency, the need, what foods would be most appreciated, and shop together for these items.
- Collect change in a visible container marked with the name of every family member able to make contributions. Decide together where the money goes.

Family Action

- Introduce the idea of doing service together; ask what each person would choose to do.
- Perform service through an established community organization. This can be especially supportive if you are venturing into a less comfortable or unknown service area. Be willing to take risks—an important model for your children!
- Use the holiday season as a springboard to participate in service opportunities. Then discuss ways to keep involved "off" season.
- Share what you enjoy—give your young child's drawings to a senior center for display; put on a puppet show at Head Start; contribute an original storybook, picture, or poem to a children's hospital; help play Bingo at a community center; bring flowers from your garden to elderly neighbors or a convalescent facility; bake "monthly birthday treats" for a shelter or hospice; help clean the beach or hiking trail that you frequent; organize musicians to perform at a community benefit.

- Often what appears to be a one-day service opportunity has ongoing activities that you can investigate. After participating in a one-day Special Olympics festival, inquire about additional ways to help year-round.
- Find out if your cultural organizations have ways families can help.
- Invite other families to join with you in service; the camaraderie can help develop the spirit of service.
- Do a good deed to commemorate someone's special event; for example, enclose a note with a birthday gift saying "A copy of this book was also given in your honor to our school library." The same idea can be applied to other situations; for example, if your family cannot visit an ailing family member, send a note to this person describing what you did on their behalf in your own community.
- Find ways to recycle in varied ways, from paper and cans to belongings. Assist with neighborhood recycling by offering assistance where needed, especially to elderly neighbors who may have difficulty.

Reflection

Note that reflection in the family differs from an academic setting. This is an informal activity to exchange thoughts, feelings, and reactions, and a chance to ask questions with a natural give and take. Remember that reflection occurs in all stages of service as you make observations during service, think about what did occur, and anticipate what may occur in the future.

- Vary what you do with your children. You might ask a question on one occasion and next time simply share something you noticed and ask for their feedback.

- If the setting permits, take photos occasionally and use these to discuss what took place and their response to the experience, or to write a family book.
- Respect your child's experience and reaction, whether similar or different from your own.
- Refrain from answering every question; instead agree to find out together—by reading, visiting places, and asking others about important issues.
- Again, books are excellent resources to help family members make sense of and understand their experiences. Together, o individually, you may want to write your own stories or produce artwork that is reflective of your thoughts and feelings.
- Allow time for a child to reflect; allow time to think and feel without being rushed or necessarily fitting into a prescribed time frame.
- Use your creativity to help in the reflective process. Music, art, and writing can all be tapped on different occasions.
- Experiment with delaying your reflective probing to the next day, or several days later, to see what the response might be.
- Be sure to allow time for your own reflection.

Service Learning and Literacy

Our nation has a growing concern about literacy. We are swiftly becoming a country of nonreaders. The reading of books is being preempted by television, computers, and video games. Newspapers are no longer in every household. And most importantly, all parents do not read aloud to their children.

The research is clear: Children who are read to by their parents become better readers. They also value books, stories, and the art of storytelling more. When the tradition of reading aloud is part of a family culture, there is a better chance of the child extending that when she or he has a family.

A critical part of the read aloud process is the chance to discuss the story. Characters face struggles and challenges; friends get into arguments and have to find a resolution; internal and external conflicts raise questions of ideas and values. Children also read about people helping others. They can learn about people in need and the ways people help themselves. Their interest and curiosity become stimulated to find ways to be helpful and resourceful themselves. Books can assist in this critical learning of self-sufficiency and caring about and for others.

Encourage parents to read books, including those with service-related themes to their children. Set up a family lending library at school, or ask that a special section or display be set up in the public library. Involve your librarians in identifying good books—they are a wonderful resource!

Consider ways families can assist with issues of literacy in the local schools and communities. Possibilities may include:

- Tutoring after school or on weekends
- Donating new or gently used books to shelters, hospitals, medical clinic waiting rooms, or libraries—all to benefit other children and adults
- Spending time reading books to children at libraries, transitional living centers, and hospitals
- Recording books on tape for visually impaired readers
- Making "book gifts" for new parents at local hospitals, with a note about the importance of reading to children

Short-Term and Long-Term Participation

How much time is enough? Parents, even those willing to get involved, may be wondering how much time they will need to spend in service. Rather than working by a time clock, suggest that families consider short-term and long-term involvement.

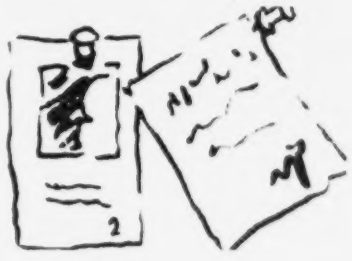
Most communities offer short-term service experiences: a beach clean-up day that needs thousands of helping hands on one Saturday or, when several families join together, preparing and serving a holiday meal at a shelter. A single experience will introduce family members to a place, a need, and a group of people and allow for planning, preparation, action, and discussion.

Long-term participation increases the potential for an even deeper and more meaningful service experience. Frequency and familiarity often moves us beyond comfort to deeper understanding of how people live, our interconnectedness, and ways we can truly be of help to one another.

Establishing Resources for Families

These days, we have a variety of ways to establish and communicate resources for families. Many have already been mentioned and will be included in this list for your consideration:

- Convene a parent information meeting regarding service learning and family service; have handouts of information and ideas, and parents with family service experience to share.
- Encourage family-to-family communication of successful activities through bulletin boards, school newsletters, and displays.
- Contact local volunteer centers and other organizations that collect opportunities, and have them assist with an information and data bank for families.
- Use e-mail and Internet systems to post upcoming family volunteer opportunities.
- Suggest and support families from the school providing service together; recommend that active parents form a family service club that gets together monthly (or more often) to join in service.
- Create opportunities for families to help at school with twice-a-year clean-up and beautification projects, or join other schools in their efforts.



Conclusion

Parents are our partners in education—either our silent partners, or vital and active. As educators we can draw them in and engage them within the school environment and beyond.

We also know, whatever our efforts, we will reach some but not all parents. Each parent that does join is a major success. The beneficiaries are all of us—the community that is helped, the educators who are no longer as isolated, the parents who have a greater understanding of how their children are learning, and most of all, the children.

Our children are figuring out how to grow into productive, caring adults. Educators and parents working together as partners create a most dynamic model.

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